

WILLIAMSON COUNTY REGIONAL HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN

What is a Regional Habitat Conservation Plan?

The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that any individual or other entity that plans to undertake an activity that could result in a “take” of an endangered species must obtain a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). “Take” is defined broadly in the USFWS regulations to include harm to a species caused by degradation or destruction of its habitat. To obtain a permit, the applicant must prepare a habitat conservation plan that shows how the potential harm to the species will be minimized and mitigated. A *regional* habitat conservation plan (RHCP) is designed to cover a large geographic area, numerous landowners, multiple species, and a variety of activities.

What are the goals of the Williamson County Regional Conservation Plan?

The Williamson County RHCP will streamline compliance with the ESA for landowners – school districts, businesses, developers, individuals and local government agencies – in the county. It will establish a uniform set of mitigation options for all of the development activities planned that might have an impact on rare species. The RHCP will ensure that the endangered species in the county are protected while the county continues to grow.

What species will be covered by the RHCP?

The RHCP will cover all of the endangered species known to exist in Williamson County, plus one “candidate species” and several “species of concern.” The endangered species are: two endangered song birds (black-capped vireo and golden-cheeked warbler) and three karst invertebrates (Tooth Cave ground beetle, Bone Cave harvestman, and Coffin Cave mold beetle). The Georgetown salamander, a candidate species, will be covered by the plan. Several other reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates, which are rare or for which limited scientific information currently exists, may also be covered by the plan. These species all occur along or west of the Interstate-35 corridor.

How will the plan work?

The RHCP will provide umbrella authorization for a number of activities that would otherwise require an individual permit from the USFWS. These activities will include: (1) new road construction and improvement projects; (2) utility easements maintenance and new easements for power, cable television, water, sewer, and natural gas pipelines; (3) school construction and improvement projects; (4) public and private construction and development; and (5) other lawful activities that might incidentally “take” one of the species covered by the plan.

To be covered by the plan, the individual or entity planning an activity that may result in a take of an endangered species will have options of participating in the RHCP by: (1) agreeing to contribute to a fund set up to acquire and maintain habitat preserves

within the county or, in some cases, in neighboring counties (mitigation); or (2) for the karst species, agree to avoid or minimize impacts by establishing a buffer or set-back from caves that contain endangered species or habitat. To be covered by the RHCP for potential impacts to the Georgetown salamander, public and private developers will be able to demonstrate that they are in compliance with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's Optional Enhanced Measures for the Protection of Water Quality in the Edwards Aquifer. Mitigation measures for the species of concern are under study.

Who's in charge of the plan?

The RHCP was prepared by technical and legal consultants at the request of the Williamson County Conservation Foundation and the Williamson County Commissioner's Court. The Foundation's board members are listed on the Foundation's website at www.wilco.org/wccf. Day to day activities are handled by the Director, Environmental Programs for the County.

In addition, there is an Adaptive Management Committee (AMC) made up of expert scientists and subject area consultants who help review the plan's activities and accomplishments and make recommendations to the Foundation's leadership and management on modifications and adaptations to be made during the term of the RHCP.

How much will the plan cost?

The costs associated with preparing the plan were covered by a \$ 1 million grant from the USFWS. The grant required a 25% match from local sources, much of which was covered with in-kind services, such as county staff time. The county constantly considers options to reduce costs and enhance flexibility for landowners, such as conservation easements, mitigation credits in-lieu of cash mitigation fees and transferable development rights.

When will the RHCP become effective?

The RHCP became effective in October of 2008 and has a plan life of 30 years.

For additional information, please go to the Foundation's website <http://www.wilco.org/wccf> or contact Gary Boyd at wccf@wilco.org, and (512)260-4226.